

The Biology of Hope

A Sermon Preached at Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens GA

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SERMON SUMMARY

My remarks grow out of clinical observations by health care professionals. About 90% of illnesses are treated OUTSIDE the established health-care system -- by holistic therapies; by family or friends; and sometimes not at all. But illness and suffering will always be around. How shall each of us foster health and wholeness in ways that include, and transcend, the techniques which technical diagnosis and treatment might offer? What is the role of HOPE in promoting the functioning of two groups of chemicals, the endorphins and the enkephalins -- and how do these serve to promote healing?

The challenge in our caring for each other lies much deeper than what we might say or do. It requires a capacity to trust; to let go particular outcomes. I must let go my ego, my need to be needed -- when I enter into the presence of one experiencing suffering and loss.

In the Buddhist tradition, the First Noble Truth says that all life is *dukkha*. *Dukkha*, often translated as suffering, has a deeper meaning. Another translation of *dukkha* is ... “a state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of the person.” *Severe distress .. associated with events ... that threaten the intactness of the person*. Suffering MAY be brought about by traumatic injury, or a life-threatening disease, intense physical pain, or other symptoms. But suffering extends beyond the physical. Suffering is distress associated with life-changing events that threaten the intactness of the person. NOT the body. The person.

My premise is that bodies do not suffer. People do. The overwhelming focus of scientific medicine upon the body and disease is necessary. But is this sufficient? Suffering is experienced by persons, not by bodies. Persons who have no manifest symptoms may nonetheless be hurting very deeply.

I'm thinking of Mary Jo, age 64. A person with a rich past, having lived in South Africa most of her life. Painful experiences of apartheid remain as much a part of Mary Jo today as forty years ago. Events of the present unleash a host of images from her past. A memorable fragrance drifts by, a loud explosion down the street. She has not forgotten how to roller skate, and her hands still remember some long-neglected keyboard skills. All these comprise her person-hood.

I'm thinking of Jason, aged 38. A person with many roles: A father, a husband, a brother, an orphaned son, an uncle, a friend. He is also a racket-ball opponent, an investment counselor, a volunteer at Habitat for Humanity, and a mathematics tutor for kids in the inner city. All of these are roles. But if Jason becomes suddenly unemployed, or is injured in an auto accident, Jason as a *person* is diminished when he can no longer function in the roles that are part of his person-hood. His suffering from that loss of person-hood may be far greater than any immediate physical pain.

Suppose I am in the presence of someone who is suffering -- experiencing a loss of their person-hood. In that situation, my ego can get entangled: “I want to be helpful and supportive to you. And I want this, in part, so that I can feel useful in being able to make a difference.” We risk A LOT of ourselves when we venture to be compassionate. The risk is far more complex than simply not knowing “the right words”. The risk is that our anxiety and discomfort over our friend's physiological condition will overpower our attending to their person-hood. They are suffering because their person-hood is diminished. Can I engage them at that level?

What happens when we care deeply for someone, but become afraid? If I feel afraid, I may do one of two things. One: I may keep a safe distance. I may back away, and treat this person as if their distress is like a minefield, with trip wires that I should avoid being near. When a friend is suffering, the voice of fear might cause me to say to my friend:

“I'll be back when you're feeling better. You need to rest. Let's get together again when you're more like the person you used to be, or when things settle down for you.” I convince myself that this person's emptiness, pain, confusion, or sense of loss: Such feelings are uniquely theirs. Who am I to intrude upon that very fragile territory? The unspoken message is: “I'll be waiting when you are back to how I remember you.

But I'm uncomfortable when things are in the pits for you. I don't want reminders of my own mortality, or the fact that I may be unable to do anything useful for you. So I'll be waiting, till it looks safer."

Is this sometimes the message we inadvertently convey? In our optimism, our proclamations of human worth, responsibility, and self-sufficiency: Might we be implying that it is somehow more worthy of human dignity to "go it alone" when times get rough?

There's a second response that I may default to, amidst illness and suffering. This response is, in a way, the opposite of backing away. This is an anxious, problem-solving involvement with this person's pain and loss. Perhaps I may want to compare their situation with others I may know about. Then, with the best of intentions, I may try to represent this person's complex emotions with a few cogent observations. I'm uncomfortable amidst THEIR discomfort and their vulnerability. So I'm going to disguise my discomfort with usefulness. And even though my stories and explanations may come from a genuine desire to be compassionate, if I take a close look, I'll realize that my words may arise out of my own fear. My fear that I WILL LET MY FRIEND DOWN IF I'M NOT USEFUL IN THEIR LOSS OF THEIR PERSONHOOD.

"Perhaps we try too hard to offer comfort in words the wounded spirit is sensitive to sustaining love in other things than words. The touch of a hand can dispel that terrible sense of aloneness. A silent presence can be more eloquent than the loveliest words. We may offer our tribute, but we do that for ourselves, not for the grief-stricken, for they know their loss as we cannot express it for them.

"But it is something to know that others care. To know that other hands are reaching out through that seemingly impenetrable darkness which bears in upon the spirit, to know the tactile presence of love which respects our grief and shares it, keeping alight that little candle in our lives which flickered and seemed to go out as the darkness gathered us in: this is the service only love can offer, the service that can sustain.

"Time will bring healing, as words cannot; but the healing of time waits upon the sustaining love of friends, the continuing labor for which, even in our darkness, the world waits upon us to do: the labor which we, even in our distress, must do; and in doing, may find renewal of the spirit of life."

(adapted from Hugh Robert Orr)

May this be our resolve, our hope, and our promise to one another.